

# Lifelong Learning—What If?

By Marc Dicciani

One of the greatest things about being a teacher is learning; and one of the most important things I've ever learned is *how* to learn. As a teacher, I believe my primary goal is to teach students to become lifelong learners. This is a valuable skill that helps not only with drumming but with almost everything we encounter in life. World-renowned musician Herbie Hancock once said, "A great teacher is one who realizes that he himself is also a student, and whose goal is not to dictate answers but to stimulate his students' creativity enough so that they go out and find the answers themselves."

I believe some of the best drummers in the world are not necessarily the ones who have been *playing* the longest, but the ones who have been *learning* the longest. These are the ones who continue to learn and reinvent themselves, and their playing, throughout their entire career—every time they pick up the sticks, read articles and books about drumming, listen to music, observe other drummers, or even just think about their role in an ensemble or band.

So what does all this really mean? How can we put this concept into practice to help us become better students? (Remember, we're all students.) Here is my number-one principle in learning how to learn: keep an open and creative mind and constantly explore the infinite possibilities and combinations of things. I call this principle "what if?" I use this simple phrase in every lesson, rehearsal, and class. I use it to challenge students to examine the ways in which they think, some of which might actually be holding them back from realizing their full potential.

This principle is not so much about a specific idea in drumming, but how to take all your learned drumming and musical ideas, lessons, and concepts and make them truly your own. This can be done by understanding, examining, exploring, finding, analyzing, creating, synthesizing, building, evaluating, and turning these ideas upside-down and inside-out. I feel strongly that learning music is less about judging, critiquing, and trying to be better than someone else, and more about evaluating, assessing, being open, and trying to be better than *yourself*.

So for right now, let's not think about *how* to play the drums or *what* to play, but about the infinite possibilities of how and what to play. We can never exhaust all of the combinations of sounds, rhythms, accents, patterns, feels, styles, groupings, phrasings, and interpretations that can be created. When you combine all of

these musical ideas with the sonic potential of tuning choices, drums, cymbals, heads, sticks, and brushes, the resulting combinations are limitless. When we play and practice, our greatest barrier is not a lack of blazing technique or speed, or the shortcomings of our equipment, but quite possibly the breadth of our imagination.

in music and drumming. True innovation and the development of our own unique and special musical voice is easily within our grasp through simply applying the "what if?" principle to all that we do.

As we continue to venture down the road of learning and becoming better drummers (and people), we must make sure to keep our

One of the biggest myths in drumming is that "everything that can be played has already been played."

Here's an example: One of the biggest myths in drumming is that "everything that can be played has already been played." Let's have a little fun with math to help support my claim that we will never exhaust all of the possibilities for *what* and *how* to play.

Let's start simple, with eighth notes in 4/4 time. There are 256 different combinations of eighth notes and rests in one measure of 4/4. When you add just one level of accents (so you can play each note with or without an accent), the possibilities now increase to 6,561. This is already a big number, and if you wrote out each variation listing 20 per page it would fill a 300-page book. Let's now add a level of volume (soft, medium, and loud) and one other drum (small tom). We now have 390,625 combinations, and we haven't added any other toms, bass drum, hi-hat, or cymbals—and we're still only looking at one measure of eighth-notes.

If we calculate the same five options for one measure using sixteenth notes instead of eighths, we come up with 152,587,890,620 possible combinations; that's 152 *billion* combinations in just one measure! Let's put that number into perspective; it would take 414 drummers playing 365 days a year, 16 hours each day, non-stop for 70 years at a tempo of quarter-note equals 60 beats-per-minute to play all of the combinations in just one measure! So when you begin to imagine all of the possible variations of rhythms, sounds, accents, and interpretations in a four-minute song, the possibilities are virtually and literally unending.

What does this math prove, and what point does it make about learning? Simply this: Keep an open mind and constantly explore new ideas. Don't just accept anything as "fact," especially

minds open and explore the endless capacity for expression through the drums. Always remember to take your best learning mantra with you everywhere you go to keep you fresh, creative, unique, and a student for life. What if?

**Marc Dicciani** is the Director of the School of Music at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and is Professor of Drumset. He has performed and toured with countless renowned artists and conducted drum clinics around the world. Visit his website at [www.dicciani.com](http://www.dicciani.com). PN